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Repopulation & Workforce Development Testimony

Good morning, Policy Committee members,

I want to extend my sincere appreciation to each of you for making the trip to Mercer County. It is great to see several familiar faces from our last hearing, and I offer a warm welcome to those visiting for the first time.

Approximately five years ago, Penn-Northwest conducted a 'listening tour' with a majority of our 170 members to better understand the needs of our business community. We asked what services and tools are beneficial in the support of expansion and relocation, what programs they use to assist with equipment purchases and facility upgrades, and most importantly, where the gaps exist in sustaining a strong and vibrant local economy. Regardless of size, industry, or product, the response was consistent: we need workers at all levels.

Today, our local companies are constrained more by workforce availability than by revenue potential. A declining population does more than create an estimated daily workforce shortage of 1,500 to 2,000 workers. It impacts the tax base, limits funding for critical infrastructure, increases the burden on remaining residents, challenges the viability of restaurants and retail, raises the cost per student in our school systems, and makes external investors weary to commit.

While these challenges are not unique to Mercer County and I'm sure many of you have had or heard similar conversations, I want to highlight the steps we have taken to address population decline and where additional support could accelerate our progress.

Penn-Northwest has positioned itself at the forefront of how economic development organizations can lead and facilitate efforts to repopulate rural communities and address workforce shortages. With funding secured by Representative Wentling and Senator Brooks, we launched a young adult-led repopulation strategy known as the Homegrown Initiative.

This initiative is centered on three core objectives: career awareness, career placement, and civic engagement. We identified a critical gap in student awareness of local career opportunities. To address this, the Homegrown Initiative connects hundreds of students with employers monthly through in-school engagements, virtual reality experiences, site tours, and business/school partner events. Starting as young as 5th grade, we begin laying the foundation for the next generation to understand the variety of ways they can earn a family-sustaining job in Mercer County. From junior year of high school through a student's journey to their MBA, we act as a career counselor, helping students connect with the right employers for them and helping businesses offset their cost through CareerLink designated funds.

On the talent attraction side, the Homegrown Initiative also launched a Make My Move campaign to promote Mercer County nationally and incentivize remote workers to relocate. Our initial goal was modest, attract five families from at least 100 miles away, earning at or above the county's median income of $60,000.

To date, more than 1,200 families have applied to relocate, generating over 416,000 impressions nationwide. The average household income among applicants is $112,000, nearly double our average. So far, 19 individuals have relocated, contributing an estimated $530,000 in annual economic impact, including approximately $62,000 in local tax revenue.

Beyond the direct fiscal impact, this effort has revealed a significant external market for residential development. Historically, developers have focused on internal demand, which in shrinking rural communities often cannot support new market-rate housing. However, the demonstrated interest from qualified out-of-market individuals provides actionable data on income levels, housing preferences, and motivations, insights that are now informing and encouraging new housing development strategies.

While we believe we have made great strides towards building a stable population, we still have some core issues we need to work to solve, specifically around the difficulties in building market-rate housing in rural communities. With a cost to build identical with that of a Pittsburgh sub-market, enticing developers to build in Mercer County can be difficult.

Thank you for coming here to meet with us today, we sincerely appreciate everyone's time and interest.